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SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

AFRICOM FOR JIM BARBER
DEPT FOR USAID FOR ANGELA MARTIN

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KCOR](#) [KDEM](#) [KISL](#) [KIRF](#) [ML](#)
SUBJECT: IN FOOTBALL STADIUM FULL OF FOLLOWERS, ROCK STAR
IMAM PRAISES USG

REF: A. 08 BAMAKO 00574
[1](#)B. 08 BAMAKO 00884

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: During a March 15 celebration of the Muslim holiday of Mawloud at one of Bamako's largest football stadiums, imam and preacher Cherif Ousmane Madani Haidara praised U.S. support for Mali's Muslim community before a crowd of 35 to 40,000 followers. Haidara, who routinely attracts crowds numbering in the tens of thousands, is known in Mali for his outspoken support for democratic openness, anti-corruption, and Malians' right to pray in local languages as opposed to Arabic. In recent years the Embassy has made a concerted effort to reach out to Haidara, inviting him to participate in international visitors programs and attend Embassy events (Ref. A). Pleased that the Embassy responded to his invitation to attend his Mawloud ceremony, Haidara publicly thanked the U.S. for supporting Mali's Muslim community and elicited a roar from the crowd when he revealed having cast a mock ballot for President Obama during the Embassy's November 4, 2008, election night event. End Summary.

Media Star Imam Haidara

2.(SBU) On March 15, the Embassy attended an event hosted by Cherif Ousmane Madani Haidara for the Muslim holiday Mawloud at Bamako's Modibo Keita football stadium. Haidara is the spiritual guide of the Ansar Dine movement in Mali, the vice president of Mali's High Council for Islam, and one of Mali's most influential Muslim leaders. The event on March 15 attracted an estimated 35,000 to 40,000 people, overflowing the 25,000 person capacity stadium and spilling onto the nearby hillside. Haidara has held an event commemorating Mawloud every year since 2003. He told the Embassy that this year's event was the largest yet, with representatives attending from 22 countries across Europe, Africa, and the Americas. The Embassy was the only diplomatic mission in attendance.

3.(SBU) Haidara became popular during the 1980s due to his outspoken criticism of the military dictatorship of General Moussa Traore. Indeed, Haidara was one of the first Malians to publicly call on Traore to institute democratic reforms. Traore retaliated by banning Haidara from preaching in mosques or using national radio and television to reach his audience, thereby increasing Haidara's popularity even more. In response, Haidara's followers resorted to circulating his sermons and speeches on bootleg cassette tapes. The use of cassette tapes served as a means of evading government control, but also heralded a type of popular Islam distinct from that represented by traditional Islamic leaders. Although Haidara has been free to speak his mind since Mali's

1991-1992 democratic transition, anti-corruption and democratic reform remain key components of his message. Another important aspect of Haidara's philosophy is the belief that African Muslims may pray in local languages as opposed to Arabic.

4.(SBU) Other, less populist Muslim leaders in Mali sometimes bristle at Haidara's stance on local languages during prayer and use of the media to promote his message. They cannot quibble, however, with the fact that Haidara is one of Mali's most influential Muslim leaders and likely Mali's most recognized imam.

A Public Diplomacy Coup

5.(SBU) Evidently pleased that the Embassy responded, alone among diplomatic missions in Bamako, to his invitation to attend his Mawloud extravaganza, Haidara described at length to the packed stadium various USG efforts to support Mali's Muslim community. Referring to the Embassy's 2002 donation of 80 fans to the famous mud-brick mosque in Djenne and subsequent use of Cultural Preservation Funds to help preserve ancient Islamic manuscripts in both Djenne and Timbuktu, Haidara thanked the U.S. for supporting efforts to preserve Mali's Islamic heritage. He thanked the Embassy for recent support, in the form of computers and other equipment, to Mali's High Council for Islam (HCIM) where Haidara serves as vice president. Displaying a remarkable memory, Haidara also acknowledged a USAID program from many years ago that provided Arabic language textbooks to Malian medersas via the

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Ministry of Basic Education's Medersa Unit.

6.(SBU) Haidara also mentioned the Embassy's offer to send him to the U.S. as an international visitor. Haidara has twice backed out of IV programs at the last possible minute for reasons that remained unclear until June 2008 when he told the Embassy he was deathly afraid of flying. Haidara explained to the crowd that the purpose of the proposed trip to America was to enable him to see freedom of religion in the United States as it affected American Muslims, and said that Americans are in fact supportive of Islam as a religion, conventional wisdom notwithstanding.

7.(SBU) Haidara also shared with his followers his experience during our November 4, 2008, election night event, which was well attended by many of Mali's main religious leaders (Ref. B). Haidara elicited an enthusiastic cheer from the stadium and surrounding hillside when he revealed, over the stadium's PA system, that had cast a ballot for President Obama during the election night event's mock election.

The Rest of Haidara's Message

8.(SBU) The effusive praise of the U.S aside, most of Haidara's Mawloud sermon was dedicated to his traditional themes - anti-corruption, government accountability, and individual self improvement. Haidara criticized Malian government corruption, and decried the impunity offered by an ineffective and equally corrupt justice system. Haidara took specific aim at Mali's embattled Auditor General's Office, which has released several sweeping annual reports on the extent of corruption in Mali but has yet to prompt a single criminal investigation or indictment. Haidara maintained that nothing could be done to remedy corruption in Mali until Malians themselves changed their individual behavior. He concluded the sermon by calling for greater understanding, peace, and changes in personal conduct.

Comment: Muslim Outreach

9.(SBU) Haidara's impromptu praise of U.S. assistance to Malian Muslims and Americans' traditional respect for religious freedom illustrated the sweeping, and sometimes unexpected, impact of our Mission's outreach to local Muslim communities. While the Embassy has a history of engagement with Malian Muslim leaders through the International Visitor's program, the Ambassador's Cultural Preservation Fund and speakers' programs that bring American Muslims to Mali, Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Program (TSCTP) funding has enabled us to undertake additional large-scale actions that have attracted public attention. These TSCTP-funded programs include the computer donation to the HCIM, support for a national conference on Koranic schools, the incorporation of medersas into the USAID Basic Education program, funding for the visit of Georgetown University's Imam Hendi, annual seminars for teachers of English at Malian medersas and provision of VOA equipment to radio stations in key Muslim communities. We are hoping to build on this positive momentum by working with DOD colleagues to find ways to provide textbooks to the over 250,000 medersa students in Mali.

10.(SBU) Perhaps most important, however, are the personal relationships that such close cooperation engenders between Malian Muslim leaders and Embassy personnel. The simple act of being present at important Muslim celebrations is proof positive of American government respect for the tolerant nature of Malian Islam. When we can complement this presence with the kind of generosity expected of the American government, we succeed in building bridges that reinforce Malians' traditional rejection of extremist messages while dispelling mistaken assumptions that the U.S. is somehow intolerant of Islam.

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